

Research Background:

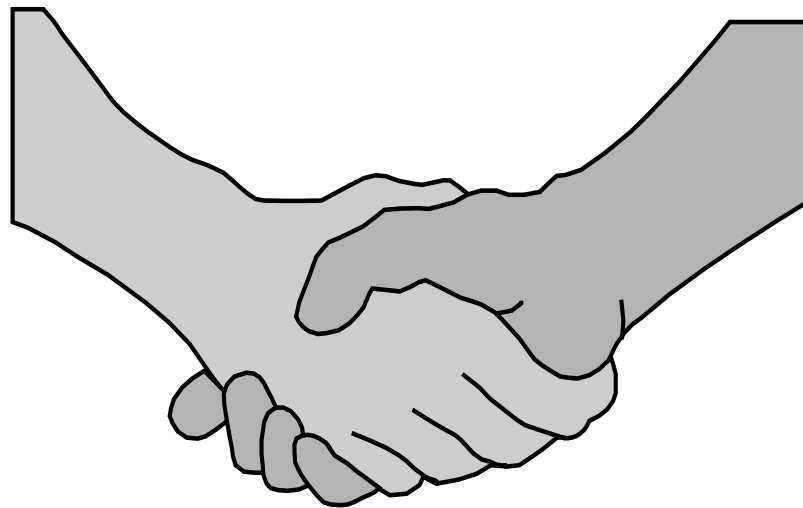
There is much evidence, provided through some fairly recent polls, that shows that citizens have a high level of distrust of their government. This may not come as a surprise to many, as our country's history shows that this theme has been long in existence. Although starting much earlier, it is most prevalent over the last 100 years - from the time of the large corrupt bureaucratic political machines of the industrial revolution, when administration and politics were blended as one, to the more recent examples of Watergate and the attempts to impeach President Clinton, not to mention a host of government scandals and corruption on all levels of government - local, state and federal.

However, what is worrisome, is the public's, and probably more importantly the governments', seemingly acceptance of this growing theme and its impacts upon the future of this country. It is this concern that has prompted the research and study utilized in the creation of this brochure. It is a hope that any improvement in the process, which would create a more participatory and effective citizenry, would result in a positive effect on the city and country; creating a better place in which to live.

This brochure was based upon the results of a Study that surveyed Planning Directors in Orange County, California, during March 2001. The study not only identified approaches that citizens should take when approaching decision-makers, but also identified actions which public administrators should consider to improve the quality and effectiveness of the public participation process.

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How to be More Effective with Decision Makers



A Guide for Citizens on What to Do and What Not to Do When Approaching Decision Makers

Public participation in government can be a very frustrating experience. Often, citizens walk away from public hearings wondering if their elected officials or decision-makers actually even heard what they were saying.

There seems to be many reasons for this frustration. Some of which are based upon the decision-maker's inability to listen and actively participate with citizens, while others are based solely on the citizen's unwillingness to bend and participate in a cooperative manner.

Unfortunately, these feelings of frustration can lead citizens to having a lack of trust in their elected officials and decision-makers, and thereby resulting in a deterioration of the community as a whole. This brochure was produced with the intent of helping citizens find a better way to deal with their elected officials and decision-makers.

There are 10 ways in which a citizen can improve his or her chances in effectively influencing elected officials and decision-makers at a public hearing. These are as follows:

1. **Become Informed and Knowledgeable.** Take the time to contact City Staff well in advance of the public hearing to fully understand the issues. The Staff is available for your use so that you can fully understand what is going on. Obtain and carefully read copies of any Staff Reports that will be presented at the public hearing.
2. **Be Respectful.** Giving respect, deserves respect. At public hearings, be respectful to the officials and decision-makers that have often volunteered much of their time to serve the citizens of your community.
3. **Be Willing to Compromise.** Be open to providing feasible alternatives to decision-makers. If a project is going to be approved, there may be ways to address any impacts through other alternatives that are feasible to the City, the developer and the citizens.
4. **Be Representative.** Work with your neighbors to gain their support and representation at the public hearing. More than one voice helps the decision-makers understand the magnitude of the issues.
5. **Stick to the Issues.** Use the Staff Report to identify issues pertaining to the project. Make sure that your issues do not stray into areas that are not even being discussed.
6. **Be Organized.** Be well prepared in your presentation. Organize your thoughts. Present letters and comments in writing addressing your concerns.

7. **Be Calm.** Its safe to express your emotions, but do not yell and curse at the decision-makers. Often this leads to a complete shutdown and no-one gains. Emotions are good, but try and stay focused on the findings of fact.
8. **Use Examples.** In your presentation, use examples that the decision-makers can relate to. Provide graphic displays and photographs to show how the project will negatively impact you.
9. **Do Not Threaten.** The public hearing is not the place to threaten public officials or decision-makers with accusations of corruption. Address these issues outside of the public hearing.
10. **Be Factual.** Do not lie or distort the facts. Facts are Facts. The more facts that you can present to support your case the better. Remember that decision-makers most often base their decisions on facts that are presented in a Staff Report and/or findings of fact that they need to adopt prior to approval of a project.

Conversely, in addition to these 10 positive approaches, there are also 10 negative characteristics that have the least effect on a decision-maker siding with a citizen.

When approaching decision-makers, you as a citizen should check to make sure that none of these characteristics are found in your presentation. The negative characteristics are:

1. Being threatening.
2. Being angry/yelling.
3. Being uninformed.
4. Bringing up irrelevant issues.
5. Using incorrect information.
6. Suggesting corruption.
7. Being uncompromising.
8. Exaggerating the truth.
9. Being sarcastic.
10. Being Rude.

It is important to note that this brochure is not intended to stifle citizen's opinions or thoughts when they approach their decision-makers by trying to instill only warm, friendly, positive thoughts. It is very important for citizens to express their opinions in whatever form they feel is necessary to get their point across. However, as the Study, which this brochure is based on, indicates, there are ways that are more effective than others. It is with this intent that citizens should seriously consider the identified approaches. It is also important to note that it is not the intention of this brochure to totally eliminate the feeling of distrust that citizens may have of government. Instead, the author believes it is important to have a certain level of distrust of politics and politicians. This distrust, however, should be a healthy one; one that provides citizens with a need to seek the truth in the most effective manner.